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ABSTRACT

The recommendations for educational reform in this document are submitted by the Attorney General's office to the Minnesota State Legislature in the context of two lawsuits related to at-risk students pending in state district courts. Recommendations related to early education include screening all young children for a number of problems, intervening early to relieve and prevent problems, supplementing child care, honoring local preferences in program design, redefining public education, and remedying infrastructure problems. Early childhood funding should be the top funding priority for the Legislature for 1997, with an emphasis on funding for young children living in poverty. The following recommendations are made for promoting student achievement: (1) develop and enforce rigorous graduation standards; (2) reduce class size; (3) adjust school hours; (4) extend the school day; (5) lengthen the school year; and (6) encourage alternative learning environments. Funding for charter schools, alternative learning centers, and other innovative alternatives should be provided by the Legislature. Recommendations are also made for expanding school choice, achieving numeric and programmatic integration of students, and working to integrate communities. Recommendations are also made to ease transitions from school to work and reform education finance. The recommendations in this report are consistent with past efforts in Minnesota and offer great potential to reduce the learning gap that separates at-risk students from their peers. (SLD)

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ED 421 557

EDUCATING OUR MOST AT-RISK CHILDREN

FROM THE OFFICE OF
MINNESOTA ATTORNEY GENERAL HUBERT H. HUMPHREY III

FEBRUARY 1997

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Tommy Post

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The Case for Education Reform

Minnesota parents and educators do a superb job of preparing the vast majority of our young people for adult life. The graduates of our schools and colleges are among the nation's best educated citizens and most productive workers. Our current system easily meets the requirements for our public school system contained in the Education Clause of our State Constitution.

While our education system meets constitutional requirements, there are still Minnesota children, many of whom are of color and live in poverty, who leave our schools without being prepared for adult life. Many of these young people drop out before graduation or otherwise fail to achieve an education that enables them to succeed in society.

We should do more to help these students achieve. To accomplish that, a number of reforms are needed in the way we deliver and finance education. But we should go further. We should also seek better racial and socioeconomic integration of our community as a whole.

The following reform recommendations are respectfully submitted to the Minnesota legislature in the context of two significant lawsuits now pending in state district courts. Although we believe that the state will successfully defend these challenges, we recognize that we can -- and should -- do more as a matter of public policy to help those of our children who are most at-risk to succeed in becoming good workers, good parents, and good citizens.

These recommendations are aggressive, and some of them are costly. But in the final analysis, it is much cheaper and more humane to invest in our children in their formative years than it is to pay expensive remedial costs later. All of these reforms can be accommodated within the budget recommendations submitted by the governor. There are no more important investments for our future.

Attorney General Hubert H. Humphrey III

Expand Early Education

A prime indicator of future education success is the extent to which a child enters our public education system ready to learn. Through effective parental nurturing and outstanding day care and early childhood education programs, most of our children begin their public education knowing how to learn. Many other children, especially those who live in poverty, lack these early advantages. These kids enter kindergarten already behind their peers, and many of them never catch up.

Recent scientific research suggests that children are born with vast abilities to learn. Many patterns of learning appear to be formed and "set" within the first two years of life. If a child does not receive proper stimuli and nurturing during these critical formative years, future educational attainment may be compromised. Unfortunately, many of our poorest children lack these essentials.

- **SCREEN ALL YOUNG CHILDREN.** Minnesota's Early Childhood Screening program (ECS) is designed to identify a number of problems in children before they enroll in kindergarten. School districts are required to offer screening for all 4-year olds, and some offer it to 3-1/2 year olds. This program should be greatly accelerated and broadened to include screening for likely learning disabilities. All 3-year-olds should be screened by FY99, and the remainder of all children screened as quickly thereafter as funds can be made available. Child care providers should be enlisted to help in this screening, and the state should consider subsidizing the hiring of parents, teachers (during the summer months), and other community members to help publicize the program in the neighborhoods.

  Each year, the state should substantially increase the number of young children who are screened. The initial focus of this expanded screening shall be the state's neighborhoods of poverty.

- **INTERVENE EARLY.** Federal and state resources are used to target some programs to our young at-risk children. Examples include the federal government's "Part H" program and Minnesota's Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) and Learning Readiness programs. The legislature also supplements federal programs such as Head Start as a way of reaching still more children. Finally, several locally-originated programs have emerged in recent years. Although these programs are helpful, none of them reach all of their targeted populations.

  All children identified as high-risk in screening should have access to a range of support programs for themselves and for their families. Existing programs should be broadened and coordinated.

Minnesota Attorney General Hubert H. Humphrey III
February 1997

- **SUPPLEMENT CHILD CARE.** More Minnesota parents work outside the home than those in the vast majority of other states. With the new welfare laws, the number of working parents will increase even more, and this will put further pressure on the state's child care providers. To meet the needs of poorer parents for affordable, quality care for their children, the state's funding for child care programs should be increased in order to cover more eligible families. A portion of this expanded funding should be used to help expand and improve the education content of child care.

  The distinction between "child care" and "education" should gradually disappear as all child care programs evolve to include strong education components.

- **HONOR LOCAL PREFERENCES.** Locally driven programs often show the best results. Whether working through Family Service Collaboratives, Community Education, Community Action Agencies or other mechanisms, the results are best when all segments of a community come together to design activities that are best suited to each community's situation and needs. The legislature should accommodate these success stories by rolling early childhood programs into one or two equalized funds designed to deliver substantial state resources to communities with large numbers of at-risk very young children.

  A consolidated Early Childhood Education Aid should become the "foundation aid" for all early childhood programs, modeled after the state's basic "foundation aid" program for traditional K-12 education.

- **REDEFINE PUBLIC EDUCATION.** With the preceding recommendations, the educational quality of child care for children aged 0-5 will improve. However, more is needed. Our strengthened child care could happen in traditional home-like environments or in more structured environments like the classrooms of Head Start. While this initiative will be available to and encouraged for every Minnesota child, pre-kindergarten programs would not be *required* for every young child. Many parents will choose to provide this quality education experience at home, and these parents should receive partial subsidization through income tax credits. State subsidies would be available for families meeting appropriate income standards.

  The state should move toward a redefinition of "public education" that provides every Minnesota child with the opportunity to begin formal education at age three.

- **REMEDY INFRASTRUCTURE PROBLEMS.** State assistance for infrastructure is needed at all education levels. In the case of early childhood programs, some of the state solutions are simply the removal of barriers. For example, the legislature should reduce the building code differences which inhibit locating early childhood programs in school buildings. In other cases, infrastructure assistance may be needed for conversion of non-school buildings for early childhood program use. The legislature should consider a capital equipment fund to help equip quality child care facilities. Finally, the legislature should undertake a thorough review of the ways we transport our children to learning sites.

The legislature should assume a partnership role with local communities to promote safe and efficient infrastructure for early childhood programs, as it has in assisting local school buildings.

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The Legislature should identify early childhood programming as the top funding priority for the 1997 session. Using an equalized Early Childhood Education Aid as the basic funding mechanism, the Legislature should increase early childhood funding by $120-$140 million above current levels. A principal focus of the additional funding should be assistance for very young children who are living in poverty.

Promoting Student Achievement

The paramount goal of our education system is to help our students achieve. For most of our children, the traditional methods of delivering education have worked. We should be proud of the many Minnesota school graduates who go on to become successful parents, citizens and employees.

The success rate is not as good for our students of color and poverty. These children encounter many barriers to achievement and this results in wide "learning gaps" between them and their peers. A broad array of supports are needed for these children.

- **DEVELOP AND ENFORCE RIGOROUS GRADUATION STANDARDS.** We should adopt rigorous, content-based outcomes for our students. We should constantly review the Basic Skills portion of the Graduation Rule to make sure that the skills accurately reflect minimum job needs. We should benchmark our students' skills and abilities and monitor those closely in the years ahead. We should identify as quickly as possible the students who are not likely to meet the graduation standards and provide them special help. We should evaluate our success in meeting these goals. To monitor our students' performance, they should be tested periodically and, consistent with the privacy rights of students, the results of the testing should be published, ideally on a school-by-school basis.

  Every graduate of our public school system should have the skills, knowledge and ability to become a successful worker, citizen, and parent.

- **REDUCE CLASS SIZE.** Our most at-risk students invariably need much personal attention. We should continue to reduce class sizes, particularly for our elementary and middle school students. As we construct new facilities, we should emphasize smaller buildings and learning environments to make it easier to provide more personal contact between staff and students.

  No elementary classroom having a majority of children in poverty should have more than 15 students per teacher or qualified teacher aide.

- **ADJUST SCHOOL HOURS.** At one time, the vast majority of kids in Minnesota got up early, did their chores, went to school and were greeted at the door by Mom or Dad when they returned. In today's society, most parents work late which leaves kids with a lot of unsupervised time on their hands that can lead to trouble. Research shows that the hours from 2:00 to 6:00 — the time right after school and before parents arrive home — is the "prime time" for juveniles to commit crimes. Aside from that, studies have revealed that teens need more sleep and perform better academically when they start school at 9:30 a.m. than 7:30 a.m. By changing school hours, we can teach kids at their peak academic performance time and allow them to be supervised during the prime juvenile crime hours.

  Secondary schools should adjust their school hours to maximize both academic performance and adult supervision of teenagers.

- **EXTEND THE SCHOOL DAY.** The state's "extended day revenue" is an effective program used by about 120 districts to provide services to children with disabilities or children experiencing family or related problems "of a temporary nature." A great many students, not just those with disabilities or temporary family problems, can benefit from longer school hours and expanded learning opportunities.

  Every at-risk student should have available a menu of after-school activities.

- **LENGTHEN THE SCHOOL YEAR.** We should lengthen the traditional school year. In many cases, this will mean providing all-year school with periodic breaks of several weeks. This type of schedule has been shown to help improve the amount and retention of learning, particularly for those students who have little learning support at home.

  All-year learning programs should be available in every district.

- **ENCOURAGE ALTERNATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS.** Some of our most successful "schools" are those that operate in non-traditional manners or locations. These new models of learning include charter schools, alternative learning centers, and cooperative districts. These learning sites are frequently smaller, less formal, and more responsive to the special needs of children of color and of poverty. Current laws deny to these sites some of the same funding afforded other schools, and the legislature should remedy those deficiencies. To reduce already high transportation costs, secondary students at these alternative programs should receive state-subsidized transit cards to help relieve inadequate or expensive transportation to and from school and work sites.

  Alternative learning programs should receive increased funding and should be accessible by all who need them.

Minnesota Attorney General Hubert H. Humphrey III
February 1997

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The Legislature should aggressively pursue, with the State Board of Education, a strong Graduation Rule. To help educate some of most difficult-to-teach students, the Legislature should increase funding for model education environments which have been proven, in Minnesota and elsewhere, to offer the greatest potential for success in educating our most at-risk students. The Legislature should increase funding for charter schools, alternative learning centers and other innovative alternatives by $15 - $25 million in FY98-99.

Community Integration

For a number of reasons, Minnesota's most at-risk children tend to be concentrated in a few communities, largely in our most densely populated urban areas but also scattered throughout more sparsely populated areas. To offset the special problems these children face, the Legislature has enacted several initiatives to target additional resources to them (e.g. compensatory aid, the assurance of mastery program for teachers, free and reduced lunches). These programs have helped, but the achievement of these children still lags behind that of their peers.

While we work to eliminate the learning gap, we should also continue with our goals of racial and economic integration in Minnesota. We must blend our student achievement goals with the goals of school and community integration.

Many of our urban middle and high schools, although integrated numerically, are not truly integrated. As children move from elementary school through middle school and on to secondary school, a separation by race begins to occur. We must remedy this by expanding opportunities for racial and socioeconomic interaction both within the schoolhouse and in the community.

- **EXPAND PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE.** Public education can be improved by expanding the public school choice options. To the greatest extent possible, no student should be involuntarily bused to a school not of their choice. All parents should have the option of sending their children to a community public school in their neighborhood or to an integrated public school magnet program within or outside of their home district. All funds designated for a student should follow her or him to their public school of choice.

  No Minnesota school district should be allowed to close its doors to a student from another district. Neighborhood schools in areas of poverty must be provided with a broad spectrum of human and social services to support the student and her or his family.

- **INTEGRATE OUR SCHOOLS.** We should subsidize and encourage voluntary inter- and intra-district programs designed to achieve both numeric and programmatic integration of our students. We must ensure that all our students have full access to a broad array of academic programs, and we should provide extra-curricular activities which encourage our students to interact outside of their formal course work. Our teachers and counselors must avoid race biases in assignment of students to academic courses. We should strengthen initiatives designed to add teachers of color to all our schools and to train teachers and counselors on diversity issues.

The Legislature should appropriate additional resources for voluntary cross-district programs to promote integrated learning, special tutoring or summer programs for students who are behind their peers, integrated after-school activities such as athletics and arts, and more transportation options to facilitate access to these activities.

Voluntary integrated programs, both academic and extra-curricular, are desirable policy and should be expanded.

- **INTEGRATE OUR COMMUNITIES.** If children leave successful school-based programs only to return to neighborhoods and households of poverty, research shows that these children are more likely to fall behind their peers and ultimately drop out. To combat these trends, we should extend our integration efforts beyond the schoolhouse by increasing state assistance for low income housing, strengthening the enforcement of fair housing laws, assisting with targeted jobs creation, improving transportation to school and job sites outside of the center cities, and promoting land use policies that encourage mixed housing. Building on the Metropolitan Livable Communities Act is one way to achieve these goals, and the Legislature should implement changes recommended in a recent bipartisan review of the act.

Integrating our schools is not enough. The elimination of the twin barriers of racism and poverty requires bold initiatives that transcend education and involve the entire community.

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Every Minnesota student living in a neighborhood of poverty should have the choice of attending a community public school or an integrated magnet program within or outside of the student's home district. State and local initiatives to integrate our communities should be enhanced. To help achieve these goals, the Legislature should appropriate an additional $10-$20 million.

Transitions From School-To-Work

More and more Minnesota citizens and employers now understand that educating our children is a matter for the whole community. Our traditional system of K-12 public education cannot by itself provide the range of skills and experiences our students need for the challenges of tomorrow. Many of the skills required for tomorrow's jobs are best taught by employers.

Surveys of Minnesota employers that pay living wages routinely show that most of these jobs do not require a baccalaureate degree or higher. However, they do require some type of post-secondary education.

Children in poverty, in particular, will benefit from broader exposure to post secondary education and to the workplace before they leave our education system. To better prepare our young people for the family and job requirements of their futures, we should do the following.

- **REDEFINE PUBLIC EDUCATION.** Earlier in this proposal we recommend redefining public education to begin at age 3. A similar redefinition is needed at the upper end: we should include the first two years of post-secondary education in Minnesota "public education." To achieve this, we should better integrate secondary and post-secondary education through expanded use of Post Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) and advanced academic and technical programs delivered in secondary school settings. Minnesota higher education, and the new MnSCU system in particular, should facilitate easier and earlier access to their institutions, especially for students of color and in poverty. The final two years of this new ***pre-K-to-14 system*** should be available without cost to our poorer students and should be supplemented by the "Learn and Earn" initiative described below.

  We must keep our at-risk students interested in secondary education, and we must also prepare them for post-secondary education as early as possible.

- **PROVIDE MENTORS.** Every child should benefit from the direct involvement and support outside of the classroom of at least one caring adult. This support can come from involved parents, through existing mentoring programs, by interventions organized by churches and other non-profit community organizations, and by commitments of employers.

  Good work and family skills cannot be instilled without positive role models. Providing such models is a superb way for the entire community to assist in the educating of our most needy students.

Minnesota Attorney General Hubert H. Humphrey III
February 1997

- **EDUCATE PARENTS.** It is especially hard for children to learn if their parents cannot read the English language. Minnesota's Adult Basic Education (ABE) program has done much for our immigrants, but the program is not able to keep up with demand. The Legislature must supplement ABE.

  Ideally, parents will attend ABE programs while their children are benefiting from other support programs nearby. Adults and children learning together can be a tremendously empowering experience.

- **ENGAGE TECHNOLOGY.** Virtually every job in our children's futures demands skills using technology. Every student should have ready access to computers and other skill-building technology in their schools and in their neighborhoods. This access should include contact with the Internet and work-based learning provided by the school and/or community employers. Public funding and regulatory policies should facilitate community access to technology by all students, not just the wealthy.

  Frequent and ready access to a computer is imperative, especially for those students who are most likely not to have one at home.

- **PROVIDE WORKPLACE LEARNING.** Every public and private employer having more than 20 employees should be encouraged to provide a meaningful work-based learning opportunity for at least one student, and every student should have at least one positive work experience by the time they leave our education system. This goal can be achieved through "job contact" opportunities, formal "youth apprenticeship" programs, employment mentorships, and part-time jobs where supervisors spend time helping their youth employees learn good job skills. Commitments should be obtained from major employer organizations to provide these work-based learning opportunities.

  Students cannot learn about work from books and classes alone. We must give them access to work-based learning that exhibits both the challenges and the excitement of the modern workplace.

- **LEARN AND EARN.** We should help facilitate the financial transition from secondary to post-secondary education. A "Learn and Earn" program where we reward successful attainment of the Graduation Standards could be particularly helpful as an incentive for low income students to complete their secondary education and move into post-secondary. The establishment of savings accounts with special tax advantages could also help all students and their families save for post-secondary education.

  We cannot look only to state taxpayers to finance post-secondary education. We must also encourage -- and facilitate -- family savings for education costs.

Minnesota Attorney General Hubert H. Humphrey III
February 1997

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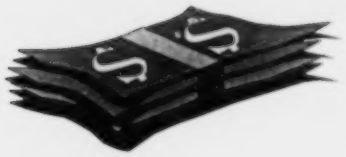
The technology, ABE and Learn and Earn recommendations require supplemental funding in amounts that will be determined in the normal education funding stream. The remaining recommendations do not require additional state funding. What is most needed is the entire community -- employers, parents, retirees, and other concerned adults -- joining together to provide our children with the full benefit of our communities' extended families.



Reform Education Finance

Minnesota taxpayers direct a substantial portion of public resources to educating our children. Over the years, a slew of special benefits, incentives and programs have been engrafted on our finance system to help shore up special needs districts and students. These efforts have been mostly successful, and they clearly satisfy our Constitution's requirements. However, the additions and adjustments to the system have made it unnecessarily complex and inequitable.

The finance system can and should do a better job of fully responding to the growing needs of our children of color and poverty. Tinkering with existing formulas and finance systems will not resolve these basic underlying problems. We should undertake wholesale reform and overhaul of our school finance system and related tax structures. A detailed prescription for finance reform is beyond the scope of this report, but an overhaul will be described in general terms.

- **RESTRUCTURE SCHOOL FINANCE.** The state should reduce the extent that we rely on the property tax to finance education. Property taxes levied and raised locally should be used almost exclusively to fund local services tied to property or measured by relative property wealth. Simultaneously, we should increase the degree to which we use state taxes to pay for the core of education services. As part of this restructuring, the property tax should be made more equitable by reducing the disparities between the tax rates assessed against various types of real property.

  Many options exist for this restructuring. Whichever tax and finance reform plan is adopted by the Legislature, the resulting system should respond even more directly to the special needs of districts having large numbers of at-risk children.

- **TARGET RESOURCES.** We should better meet the resource needs of our children of color and in poverty by providing additional "Compensatory Aid" and better targeting those resources. We should foster accountability by tying any increases in the Aid to achievement of student performance goals that are established by each school, that are consistent with the Graduation Rule, and that are approved by the school district. We should increase the degree of control that each school has over the allocation of resources dedicated to each student.

  Accountability in funding is essential if real progress is to be made in educating our most at-risk students. Our finance system should have incentives designed to measure and reward improvement in student learning.

- **RESTRUCTURE TRANSPORTATION SYSTEMS.** Many of the recommendations contained in this report require improved transportation for our students and, in many cases, their parents. However, the correction of our transportation system inadequacies requires participation by a large number of community actors -- bus system operators and purchasers of transportation such as school districts, van poolers, community action agencies and others.

  The Legislature or the Metropolitan Council should commission a major study of public transportation in the Twin Cities core and develop a system that better coordinates the multitude of providers and consumers of this service.

- **IMPROVE INFRASTRUCTURE.** Transportation is not the only type of infrastructure needing attention. As our school buildings age, more and more of our poorer districts are finding it difficult to maintain their education infrastructure. The state should increase the amount of its education resources that are allocated to equalized infrastructure support. The infrastructure aid should be available for technology needs as well as traditional "bricks and mortar."

  As the state helps with infrastructure needs of education, we must look to non-traditional learning environments that promote flexibility and the smaller learning situations which are proving so successful for our children of color and poverty.

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The state should move toward a goal of paying about 75% of the cost of elementary and secondary education from state revenues. This amount is the rough cost of the "core" of education services. Achievement of this goal and funding of other recommendations contained in this report will require a number of years to implement. To begin the process, the Legislature should expand upon the governor's budget proposals for FY98-99 and redirect funding from his recommendations for an income tax credit and deduction. In addition, a moderate amount of the projected budget reserve should be used to help facilitate a transition to the new funding system recommended in this report.

The Minnesota Legislature has taken significant steps to address the educational needs of our children of color and poverty. We more than meet the standards contained in our constitution. But we can and should do better. The initiatives defined above are affordable, are consistent with past efforts, and offer great potential to reduce the learning gap that separates our at-risk children from their peers. It is our moral duty to undertake this most important challenge.

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